

Democrat leaders soften tone; But Daschle faults Bush diplomacy

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As President Bush addressed the nation and the U.S. moved closer to armed conflict, key Democratic leaders, who for months have challenged Bush's policy toward Iraq in sometimes strong language, adopted a conciliatory tone Monday.

After Bush's speech, House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) issued a somber statement of support for the U.S. troops in the field.

"Sadly, we stand on the brink of war," Pelosi said. "If our troops are ordered into action, Americans will support and stand united behind our courageous men and women in uniform, who will bear the burden of that action."

Sen. John Kerry (D-Mass.), a presidential hopeful, took a swipe at Bush but offered his backing. Kerry has been a critic of Bush's Iraq policy, especially his diplomatic efforts, though he voted for the congressional resolution authorizing the use of force against Iraq.

"Even having botched the diplomacy, it is the duty of any president in the final analysis to defend this nation, and dispel the security threats--threats both immediate and longer term--against it," Kerry said.

Senate Democratic leader Tom Daschle of South Dakota, however, bucked the conciliatory trend and took Bush to task for the imminent war.

Daschle supported a congressional resolution last year authorizing Bush to use force in Iraq, but he has criticized the president for failing to win the support of the UN Security Council.

'Forced to war,' Daschle says

"I'm saddened, saddened that this president failed so miserably at diplomacy that we're now forced to war," Daschle said in a speech to the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees. "Saddened that we have to give up one life because this president couldn't create the kind of diplomatic effort that was so critical for our country."

House Majority Leader Tom DeLay (R-Texas) had long urged Democrats to tone down their criticisms of Bush's Iraq policy. He repeated that demand Monday.

"There is a proper time and place for vigorous debate, but now is the time for America to speak with one voice," DeLay said. "In the weeks and months ahead, let us rededicate ourselves to our common mission, the defense of freedom."

In general, the halls of the Capitol were quiet Monday, as Republican and Democratic leaders met with the president late in the afternoon.

Congress, however, tried to stick to its regular schedule. A few senators quietly debated budget and tax policy on the floor.

In the House, Judiciary Committee Chairman James Sensenbrenner (R-Wis.) prepared for a committee session on establishing a nationwide Amber Alert system. And Senate appropriators scheduled hearings on federal spending this week for everything from military construction to the national parks.

Sen. Dick Durbin (D-Ill.), who opposes the use of force against Iraq, said Congress is likely to be so distracted by war that many domestic agenda items will fall by the wayside.

"I think it will be very difficult while the war is raging for us to focus on other issues," Durbin said. "The American people have waited patiently now for a long time for health care, Medicare reform, education funding--and now I'm afraid they'll have to wait longer."

Sen. Joseph Lieberman (D-Conn.), on the other hand, said Congress must forge ahead with its work.

"While our hearts and souls and a lot of our minds will be on what's happening around Iraq, the best we can do is be at our duty stations and carrying out the work that America sent us to do," said Lieberman, a presidential hopeful.

Congress voted last fall to give Bush the authority to use military force against Iraq, and the House and the Senate have had little opportunity to formally debate the issue as it has heated up recently. However, Bush is expected to send Congress a supplemental spending request to pay for the cost of the war, which will give lawmakers a chance to weigh in after American troops have begun to fight.

Fitzgerald lauds Bush

Sen. Peter Fitzgerald (R-Ill.) called the United Nations a dead end and praised Bush's judgment in handling the tense situation.

"Absent a radical 11th-hour change of heart by Saddam Hussein, it appears we are on the brink of war in Iraq," Fitzgerald said. "Our thoughts and prayers are with our American troops in the gulf, who may soon be called to risk their lives in defense of our country."

Rep. Jan Schakowsky (D-Ill.) said she is worried that Bush's course of action would isolate the United States from its allies, undermine the UN as an institution, and further strain the nation's ability to pay for homeland security and other domestic priorities.

"I'm as convinced, maybe more so today, that this is both unwise and unnecessary," Schakowsky said.